



## LITERARY REFLECTIONS OF TRIBAL ISSUES IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S ARJUN

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### ABSTRACT

The short story, Arjun is written by Mahasweta Devi. The Arjun tree and tribal society that appear in the center of the story. The tribal people in the story cut trees to earn their means of livelihood. Cutting trees for money and other means was not their own choice but helplessness. In fact, the events of cutting trees stir their hearts within. The wood reminds them how its help caused them to live in the forest safely without any cost. The tribal man Ketu succeeds in his plan of declaring the tree as sacred one, a village God. He defeats Bishal Babu, a landlord and Ram Halder a politician. The writer unravels the age-old relationship of tribal people with wood and Nature. They are living in the company of nature and wood since the time immemorial. The realization of this relationship between wood and the tribal communities is the focal point in the story. The connecting link between nature and the tribal people is the tree, Arjun. In Indian society almost all are well aware about tribal culture, its connectivity with woods and religious importance of trees. That is why the principal objective of the paper is to study the reflections of tribal issues in the story, Arjun

**KEYWORDS:** Arjun, Tribal Culture, Tribal Literature

### INTRODUCTION

Written by Mahasweta Devi and published by Sahitya Academy the story, 'Arjun' appeared in the journal, 'Indian Literature' in April 2013. The story focuses on an indelible line between the tribal people and the wood they live in. Mahasweta Devi brings forth the burning issues of the lives of the tribal communities in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Chhattisgarh to her readers through her literary works, in general. She articulates the serious problems of environment, so called civilized society and the tribal people in the story. Born in the family of the literary parents in the city of Dacca, West Bengal (Now Bangladesh), Mahasweta Devi completed her graduation in English with B. A. honors from Vishwabharati University, founded by Rabindranath Tagore and post-graduation in English from Calcutta University. She had been a journalist and a creative writer. She made her literary debut with the publication of 'The Queen of Jhansi' in 1956. Her literary career includes her renowned work 'Draupadi'. Lots of novels and short stories are to her credit in her mother tongue.

In the story, Arjun she portrays the realistic picture of the tribal communities in the forest of West Bengal. The tribals, Ketu, Diga and Pitambar in the story are forced to cut trees from the forest nearby for the landlords and politicians. Apparently, it seems that the politicians are making provision of employment for the tribals but in fact it's been exploitation. They are forced to carry on the unjust work of cutting trees in the wood which is the main business of the politicians, Bisal Mahata and Ram Halder. The poor, uneducated and helpless trio, Ketu, Diga and Pitambar belong to Shabar, a tribal community. This work of illegal cutting of the tree leads the trio behind the bars of the jail many times. The continuous visits to jail and the act of deforestation by the tribals goes on until the time of cutting

Arjun tree does not come. Finally, they are asked to cut the big Arjun tree. Their tactics to save the Arjun tree turns out successful. Many of the tribals shares their own experiences concerned with the tree. They remember the helping hand of the tree in their hard times. The tree has played a role of human being and God as well in the lives of the tribals. The root of to protect the trees sprouted from the subconscious of the tribals which overpower the power of the politicians.

### Objectives of the paper

The paper is basically meant for studying the reflections of tribal issues in the short story, Arjun. To find out elements of tribal literature to study the story as tribal story is another objective of the story. To discuss and analyze the portrayal and problems of tribal community depicted in the story in the light of tribal literature.

### Hypotheses of the paper

The tribal people believe in trees as their lifeforce. The forest offers the tribals their shelter and means of livelihood. The tribal cut their own lifeline sometimes due to ignorance and helplessness. The politicians and the so-called leaders of tribals exploits them for different minerals and wealth.

### MATERIALS AND METHOD

The short story, Arjun published by the registrar North Maharashtra University, Jalgaon in a textbook for T.Y.B.A. Compulsory English for the Board of studies in English has been selected for discussion in this research paper. Textual and descriptive analytical methods have been used for this research paper.

### DISCUSSION

The story, Arjun not only describes the pathetic condition of the tribal community of West Bengal but also it highlights the sincere attempts the tribal people did to save the Arjuna tree. The story is double folded in meaning it describes the pathetic condition of the tribal community at one hand and their helplessness in cutting the trees on the other. Indian tribes worship trees because they believe in the theory that the trees are the forms of God. few to mention are Bunyan tree, Bodhi Tree, Nim Tree, Audumbar, Bel (Bilva) etc. Progress in the field of science changed the outlook of the few though. The advancement in science in India is to be reached yet to the remote places where the tribal communities live.

The tribal people in the story are involved in the illegal works of cutting the trees and help the politicians smuggles the woods. Quite often Ketu has been put behind the bars by the police for cutting the trees illegally. Mahashweta Devi depicts that his arrest badly affects the family. She writes, "The culprits like Ram Haldar force them to cut trees from the jungle in secret, and unfortunately the poor, illiterate and helpless men like Ketu are taken to Jail." (Khairnar 50) When the husband is in jail Mahani, the wife of Ketu goes to Manbazar to work in others' farmyards. Reaping Crops, digging soil, collecting woods, from the jungle are her daily activities." Devi's description of Ketu's wife in the story depicts the works the women in the houses of the tribal people have to undertake for livelihood.

Devi further describes that the tribal people in the jungle are the puppets in the hands of politicians like Ram Haldar. According to her the politicians are too much selfish. They don't help the tribal people to come out jail instead they search for another Ketu. She writes, "When Ketu is taken to the jail on the charges of cutting the government forest, Ram Haldar Searches for the other Ketu." (Khairnar 50). The politicians should work for the betterment of the tribal people by bringing the tribal people in the mainstream of development. Ironically both the politicians, it seems, don't want to make the people wise by offering them the means of social and economic mobility.

Emotionally the Shabars are completely shattered as they hold the bad record of spending much time in jail. Though the political leaders are well aware the fact that they need these Shabars for getting their works done, they don't take any positive initiative in the direction of the development of the Shabars. Constant visit to jail makes the Shabars helpless and leaves them to the Political leaders. They fall prey to the wicked plans of Ram Haldar and Bishalbabu. The conversation that takes place between Ketu and Bisal Babu makes the point clear to Ketu that they are not cutting the tree in order to create a road. But the trees are cut for the politicians. He further receives the information that the huge Arjun tree will be cut for Bishalbabu and Rambabu's truck will carry that tree. This revelation stirs the heart of the starved, destitute and recently jail-returned Ketu.

The tribals especially live in forest throughout our country. The Bhil and Pawara communities are tribals in the Nandurbar Districts of Maharashtra. Dr. Khairnar in his research paper, "Cultural Study of The Bhil Community in Nandurbar District

of Maharashtra" records his observation on the settlements of the tribals. "The Bhil community lives in the forest and hence the influence of nature on their culture is visible." (Khairnar) Forest has been a source of livelihood and shelter for them. The picture of the old days reminds Ketu that how the forest was dense once. The Shabars would depend upon the Arjuna Tree. Whenever they would see the outsiders, they would hide themselves in the dark and deep jungle. Their habit of hiding themselves in the jungle bring them the name of kheria-Shabar. In this regard Mahashweta Devi writes, "when they happened to see the unknown people from the outside world, they used to hide in the jungle almost like scared rabbits, or deer, hare or kheria." (Khairnar 52)

## CONCLUSION

The story, Arjun revolves round the Arjun tree and the Tribal Communities, Shabar and Santhal. Ketu, Diga and Pitambar are the tribal people while Bishal babu and Ram Haldar are the two politicians of opposite parties who exploit the tribal people. The history of the Shabar, the faith of the community in trees as God. Their past memories of marriages, and festivals, putting their hair under the trees in the name of the God, Santhals' cow dances under the tree, paying offerings to the Arjun tree before going for hunting, Arjuna's protecting them as a guard, Pitambar's living under the Arjuna Tree for many days, and The Santhals' taking shelter under the Arjuna tree when Rambabu set the houses on fire are the incidents which mark the connectivity between the tribal communities and the forest. Like other stories in this story also Mahashweta Devi throws light on the lives of the tribal communities in West Bengal. As it has been asserted by Om Prakash, "Tribal literature is concerned with the customs, cultures, contributions and creativities of the tribal communities." (Om Prakash) The entire story is a reflection of the life story of the tribal communities, their culture and customs.

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